

Carter's award acceptance speech

Editor's note: This is the prepared text of President Jimmy Carter's speech in accepting the Harry S Truman Public Service Award.

Last year I came to agree with what Harry Truman said about being president, "There is one thing about this job; it has no future in it."

Happily, I can report to you tonight that I like my new title, private citizen — and the responsibilities that go with it.

This is my first speech since my farewell address to the nation four months ago. I never thought this kind of extended vacation would be possible — but neither did I expect the election results that came last November!

It has indeed been a very pleasant time for me with my current duties and my good memories of the past and I particularly appreciate the honor tonight of being associated publicly with one of my heroes, President Harry S Truman.

I never had the opportunity to meet him personally but, without his ever knowing it, he and I have shared some memorable experiences.

We grieved together in 1945, and both of us were fearful about the future of our nation when President Roosevelt died and we realized that the United States had a new commander in chief.

A few months later I was at sea in the North Atlantic. All of us were instructed to assemble before the ship's loudspeakers for a special radio announcement from the president. I will always remember the flat Missouri voice of Harry Truman as it crackled along the crew with a bewildering message: Atomic power had been unleashed in the world in hopes that peace could finally come and the lives of many Americans might be spared in the military forces then preparing to invade Japan. We American servicemen shared President Truman's conviction that this invasion of the Japanese homeland would have cost at least a million lives, and of course there was no guarantee of success even if the attempt had been made.

Truman never doubted the wisdom of his decision to use atomic weapons to end the war. But having made that fateful choice, he was always especially conscious of the destructive force of atomic power, and the need for it to be controlled.

Later, while at submarine school in New London, I shared with the president the ordeal of the 1948 election. We had 81 officers enrolled, and I was the only one who admitted to being a Democrat. During the days leading up to the election, the others teased me unmercifully, but the following day I could not find a single one willing to talk to me about the results.

A few years later I had my only glimpse of President Truman. As a young officer, I was in charge of the pre-commissioning crew of the second atomic submarine, the Sea Wolf, and was privileged to attend the keel-laying ceremonies of the first nuclear ship, the USS Nautilus. There was a large crowd in New London for the occasion, and only at a distance could I see the flash of an arc welder as the president touched it to the special steel. Again, an unbelievable force would be unleashed — this time to propel ships which would protect our nation and preserve the

opinion polls was not worthy to hold the office.

He practiced what he preached. If he had cared primarily about popularity, he would never have fired Douglas MacArthur. He would never have fought the oil companies by vetoing giveaway natural gas legislation. He would never have instituted fair employment practices in the federal government to eliminate job discrimination.

We can still learn a lot from his wise words and from his actions. Here are a few examples:

It has been 35 years since Hiroshima, and today we know — but sometimes forget — that the explosive force of a single hydrogen bomb can be a thousand times greater than that of the first one used in 1945.

It is good for us to remember what Truman said: "As President I had the fateful responsibility of deciding whether or not to use this weapon for the first time. It was the hardest decision I ever had to make. Since then, it has been my constant aim to prevent its use for war and to hasten its use for peace."

Later he reported, "The United States offered to stop making atomic bombs when an effective system of international control had been set up. We offered to dispose of our existing bombs, and to turn over to an international agency full information on the production of atomic energy."

The control and reduction of atomic weaponry is still a vital and pressing challenge for all political leaders, and the world is still looking to us for leadership on this crucial issue.

Today, the civil rights of every American are guaranteed by law, but the role of the government is in question and the battle for economic opportunity has not been won.

Truman said: "It is more important than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights. When I say Americans I mean all Americans. We must keep moving forward, with new concepts of civil rights to safeguard our heritage. The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against the government, but protection of the people by the government. We must make the federal government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. And I mean all Americans."

Today, the cause of human rights has taken on world-wide proportions, extending from Warsaw to San Salvador. It is not a new issue, and it is not a dying issue.

Harry Truman said: "The attainment of worldwide respect for essential human rights is synonymous with the attainment of world peace. The people of the world want a peaceful world, a prosperous world, and a free world, and where the basic rights of men everywhere are observed and respected, there will be such a world."

He added, "On us as a nation rests the responsibility of taking a portion of leadership in the struggle for human rights. We cannot turn aside from the task if we wish to remain true to the vision of our forefathers and the ideals that have made our history what it is."

America must never ignore or forget these words.

President Truman was prophetic about other important challenges to our country.

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Some of these experiences, of course, were shared with many people, but tonight I want to talk about a special relationship shared with only a very few — that derived from service as president of the United States.

In the White House I learned all I could about my predecessor, but for reasons which this particular audience can well understand, much of my studying was devoted to the Truman administration. In assessing those critical years, I was impressed with the sometimes strange persistence of issues which have bound modern presidents together. Many of his problems were still mine, and many of the decisions he made helped to determine what I had to do.

Some key thoughts and phrases now come to mind, still significant to a president after more than 30 years: civil rights, oil companies, Israel, Palestine, nuclear arms control, China, Korea, hostages, inflation, full employment, Greece and Turkey, Iran, the Soviet Union (and Andrei Gromyko), Poland, the United Nations — and the Truman Balcony.

With some of the issues, like peace in the Middle East and civil rights at home, the goals for which we struggle are remarkable unchanged even though time has given us some elements of progress.

For others, the situation has completely changed or even reversed. For President Truman, Iran was a notable success as he forced Soviet withdrawal. China, on the other hand, became one of the tragedies of his administration with

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President Truman was prophetic about other important challenges to our country.

Today, the United States, once a net exporter of oil, has become the world's greatest importer. Our nation's stake in energy development — the issue over which Truman had some of his most bitter political battles — has now become more obvious and even more critical. With remarkable foresight, President Truman wrote 23 years before OPEC shocked the world: "The tremendous importance of oil to the government is difficult to overestimate. The production of petroleum in the United States during 1952 fell far short of meeting the consumption, and this deficit is expected to grow larger year by year."

How much easier my job would have been had my predecessors heeded his admonition!

With the passage of time, building on the mistakes of some and the wisdom of others, we have continued to improve our nation and to realize some of its more worthy goals. Debate is more open and free. Civil rights are now at least recognized in the laws of the land. Since Vietnam the American public has become more intimately involved in shaping foreign policy. We have finally recognized some inherent limits even on our own natural resources and by avoiding unnecessary involvement in the international affairs of other countries.

As in Harry Truman's day, it is a difficult and challenging time to represent the people's interests in public office. Well-heeled lobbyists still haunt Washington seeking favorable treatment at the expense of the general public. Fringe political groups use scare tactics to intimidate those who disagree with them. And now there is a heightened skepticism about what government can or should accomplish.

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As I walked the floors of the White House or worked in the Oval Office I thought many times that more of his proposals should have been adopted. Some of them could have saved me and our nation a lot of anguish. We can only imagine how different the world might be if the Congress and the United Nations had adopted his proposal to outlaw all nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the world may have seen worse problems if the Soviet leaders had accepted Truman's invitation to participate in the implementation of the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe.

President Truman faced some very difficult times, but he was always determined to protect our national interests, to resist aggression and at the same time to establish a permanent basis for peace.

As president, Harry Truman had to deal with war but he helped make it possible for me to enjoy four years of peace. He made it clear that we would meet communist threats to freedom whenever our own interests were involved. He reconfirmed the principle of civilian control of the military, and constantly fought to protect the constitutional power of the presidency. He believed correctly that he was the best spokesman and protector for his fellow citizens — and he did speak up for them, and he did protect their interests even though at times the people didn't understand what he was doing. He was willing to take the heat — and he had to take a lot of it!

He was criticized from both sides. From the left, by those who continued to trust Stalin and who wanted America to be more accommodating to our former wartime allies in the communist world. From the right, by those who espoused a nuclear confrontation in Korea. As a matter of fact, the fundamental policies he established following World War II still form the basis for U.S. foreign policy.

As he faced re-election President Truman's worst political problems were with his domestic policies — particularly within his own party. When the Democratic Convention of 1948 approved a progressive civil rights plank the Dixiecrats walked out. They said Harry Truman had gone too far.

A reporter asked Strom Thurmond (another problem Truman and I shared) why he was concerned. After all, hadn't Roosevelt run on a similar platform? "I agree," Thurmond said, "but Truman really means it."

The left wing of his party was just as unhappy. They failed to understand that times had changed, and wanted him to

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As in Harry Truman's day, it is a difficult and challenging time to represent the people's interests in public office. Wheel-heeled lobbyists still haunt Washington seeking favorable treatment at the expense of the general public. Fringe political groups use scare tactics to intimidate those who disagree with them. And now there is a heightened skepticism about what government can or should accomplish. There are even those who argue that the main business of government should be to do nothing — to abandon those who need help and to retreat from the field of political battle, especially on the most controversial and vital issues. These voices are not new; for the time being they are only louder.

Some of the critics simply do not have faith in democratic government, because they fear the exercise of the public will — the demand for justice and broader economic opportunity.

Harry Truman always remembered that our nation's best investment was in people. He had to struggle for success, and he appreciated government at all levels and its responsibilities in overcoming obstacles to personal achievement. He was never reluctant to use government forcefully when necessary to pursue the public good. He was proud of tight budgeting and the elimination of waste, but these goals were not considered to be ends in themselves. They merely permitted government to do a better job of what was right and what was necessary.

His ultimate goals were the same ones that still guide our Democratic party and most other Americans. He witnessed fluctuations in public opinion and had to accommodate them at times, but his basic beliefs did not change and he was always willing to fight for them.

In my inaugural address I quoted my high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman, who often said, "We must adjust to changing times and still hold on to unchanging principles."

Times do change and the new challenges for each generation must be met with wisdom and courage, but there are some important things which stay the same.

The tradition that Harry Truman inherited from Franklin Roosevelt was continued once again by John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. They all knew that carrying on a tradition meant much more than just trying to repeat what had occurred before. These Democratic presidents were all committed to the important role that government can and must play in building a just society, a secure nation, and a peaceful world.

The difficulty is in balancing these commitments against one another so that all can be pursued with the optimum chance for success. I had to face the same kind of challenges: basic rights for human beings; a healthy national economy; the maintenance of a strong defense force; an active search for peace and arms control; the protection of our natural resources; the growing challenge of nuclear proliferation and the organization of an effective government to make possible the achievement of these goals.

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The left wing of his party was just as unhappy. They failed to acknowledge that times had changed, and wanted him to re-enact the New Deal of the 1930s and early '40s and made every effort to throw him out as the Democratic leader. He dismissed them as "crackpots" and continued to lead in his own way.

Things turned out well for our country, and he managed to win — without the Dixiecrats and without the "crackpots." After he won that big upset he continued to serve well, left office as our most unpopular president — but, as you know, is now recognized as a truly great leader.

As a Democratic president, I learned to respect this man more for his character than for his political ability. He used to say that any President who made decisions based on

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All of my efforts and those of other Presidents have been enhanced by the example set for us by President Harry Truman. Our sentiments have best been expressed by a genuine American hero — General George C. Marshall. Standing with President Truman one day he said:

"The true measure of this man will only be proved by history. But I want to say here and now that there never has been a decision made under this man's administration that has not been made in the best interest of the country. It is not only the course of those decisions that will live, but the integrity of them."